



STUDENTS OF PRINCETON COLLEGE STREWING WITH FLOWERS THE TRACK OF THE FUNERAL TRAIN.

THE FUNERAL OF THE CENTURY

by Allan Peskin

The train, for a change, was running ahead of schedule but its most distinguished passenger neither cared nor noticed. It was a funeral train and it was carrying the body of James Abram Garfield, lately President of the United States, from Washington, D.C. to his final ceremonies and ultimate resting place at Cleveland, Ohio.

Only seven months earlier another train had taken Garfield, then full of life and hope, from Ohio to the capital where he would take up his new duties as president. What happened then was well known—perhaps the best-known, most closely-followed story of the century. Garfield's assassination by an

unhinged religious fanatic and the wounded president's three-month struggle with death coincided with a revolution in communications technology. The telegraph, wire services, high-speed printing presses and other devices of mass journalism combined to turn Garfield's ordeal into the first "media event" of modern times.

Never before in peacetime had Americans all over the country so avidly followed the same unfolding story step by step, finding in their common preoccupation an unprecedented unity of purpose and interest. They read the same medical bulletins, shuddered simultaneously at the gruesome details of the illness and shared a common revulsion at the insane antics of the assassin, Charles Julius Guiteau. Even Garfield, on his sickbed, marvelled at the publicity he had engendered and expected the public soon to tire of the story. Instead, all throughout the summer of 1881 the nation marked time

as it watched the events in the sickroom at the White House.

When the end came, the shared emotions that had been roused by this saga had to find some outlet. Extravagant displays of mourning and solemn memorial ceremonies marked the end of this three-month national obsession. The culmination was to be this final internment at Cleveland.

Cleveland was chosen by the president's widow because of its close association with the events of her late husband's life. He had been born fifty years earlier in a humble log cabin on the outskirts of that city when it had been little more than a frontier village. Many of his friends and associates still lived there and Garfield himself had recently bought a house at Mentor, Ohio, only a few miles to the east. Although Cleveland had never been within the borders of Garfield's congressional district, it was the chief city of Ohio's Western Reserve, an area he had represented at Washington for over seventeen years. Burial at Cleveland was akin to coming home.

The president had died on September 19, 1881 at a summer resort on the New Jersey shore. From there his body was returned to Washington by a special train. The route of that train was marked by lines of mourners who silently hailed its passage with bowed heads. Buildings and bridges along the right-of-way were draped in black and church bells tolled the mournful cargo as it rolled by. At Princeton the college students scattered flowers along the roadbed and gathered the crushed petals as relics after the train had passed.

Such extravagant displays of grief would become commonplace in the following week. Even blase Washington, D.C. succumbed to the fever. Chief Justice Morrison R. Waite, the entire cabinet and two presidents (Chester Alan Arthur and Ulysses S. Grant) met the train at the depot and stood at attention as the coffin was transferred to a hearse for its journey up Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol. It was the same route Garfield had taken only a few months earlier for his inauguration and the crowds which lined the street were as densely packed as on that happier day. On that occasion a hearse had somehow gotten caught up in the parade, causing the superstitious to shudder. Now a hearse was the center of attention and it slowly rolled down the avenue to the beat of muffled drums. The coffin was placed in the very middle of the Capitol rotunda which had been hastily draped in black and piled high with flowers. An oversize wreath of white rosebuds from Queen Victoria commanded particular attention.

State funerals were no novelty for Washingtonians but this one was special. Over seventy thousand citizens waited in line up to three-and-a-half hours for an opportunity to shuffle past the open coffin for a final glimpse of the fallen leader. That glimpse was not an edifying one. The embalmer's efforts proved inadequate to the Washington heat. Patches of the president's face had turned blue and his mouth was twisted into a sardonic smile. Women fainted and grown men sickened at the sight.

At eleven o'clock on the morning of September 23 the crowd was cleared and the bereaved widow spent a lonely hour with the body of her late husband. After her vigil she ordered the casket closed and so it remained. At three o'clock the memorial services began. Garfield's last hours in Washington were spent in much the same manner as his life there--surrounded by oratory.

The coffin was then borne out of the Capitol and returned to the train for its final journey westward. That train departed from the same Baltimore and Potomac station in which Garfield had been shot. In order to spare the widow the unhappy associations of that site, the engineer considerably stopped the train a few miles down the tracks and allowed her to board separately.

The little train of only seven cars evoked a competitive spirit among the various cities along its route as each hoped to outdo the others in ostentatious displays of civic mourning. Since most of the train's journey was traversed at night, much of this effort was wasted. Unlike Lincoln's funeral train, which had stopped for ceremonies at each principal city along its route, Garfield's was halted only for the necessities of the locomotive. Even so, crowds gathered at each depot along the way. At one, a long line of Civil War veterans fell to their knees as the train sped by. Pennsylvania coal miners, still grimy from their day's work, waited in the dark for a sight of the funeral car. Bonfires illuminated grade crossings and bells and cannon broke the stillness of the night.

Following the funeral train by a respectful twenty minutes was a train loaded with congressmen and other dignitaries. A third special train, crammed with journalists, brought up the rear of the procession. As it was crossing a bridge at Beaver Run, Pennsylvania it plowed into a work party, killing six. They sped quickly past the scene of the accident without even bothering to clean the blood off the locomotive. The reporters were too anxious to attend the president's funeral to stop for humbler tragedies.

The lead train reached Pittsburgh at dawn. If it continued at its present pace it would arrive in Cleveland around nine in the morning. This would be embarrassingly early. Cleveland officials in charge of the arrangements had not expected a funeral train to act like an express. Even though a gang of almost one hundred men had been working around the clock (illuminated at night by the newly-invented electric light), the funeral pavilion on Public Square was not yet ready. (Nor would it, in fact, be finally completed until some days after the funeral was over.)

Consequently, those in charge of the funeral train had to mark time. They meandered around northern Ohio for the rest of the morning, following a twisted, roundabout route. At Wellsville the train met a special car carrying Ohio's governor, Charles Foster, and a group of prominent Ohio politicians. Foster wanted his car hitched to the funeral train but Attorney-General Wayne McVeagh, who was in charge of the

arrangements, peremptorily refused. A nasty scene ensued, with Foster claiming jurisdiction over all trains within his state and McVeagh standing firm for federal supremacy. The cause of states rights met another defeat and Foster and his party were compelled to find seats in the crowded cars of the funeral train.

As Cleveland neared, the crowds along the trackside grew thicker and the last mile or two was solidly lined with spectators. Not all of them were native Clevelanders. The three-day ceremony would attract an estimated quarter-million people, a hundred thousand more than lived in the city. It was claimed that "No city in America, of equal size, ever attempted to feed and lodge anything like the number of people which will demand such service of Cleveland during the next three days." Visitors descended on the city in such abundance that all hotel rooms were snapped up at once. A United States senator who tried to pull rank to obtain a room was turned away by an unimpressed desk clerk. "The woods are full of them," he disdainfully said of senators. So were the rooming houses, tourist homes and even private residences which had been pressed into service to house the overflow crowd.

Cleveland was clearly enjoying its moment in the sun. "Among all the cities of the earth," an enthusiastic newspaper asserted, "Cleveland today occupies the first place in the attention and interest of the civilized world." Rising to the challenge, Clevelanders turned their city into a temporary necropolis. Nineteen out of twenty wore some badge of mourning and the streets and buildings were so lavishly laden with black that to the New York *Herald* the "Forest City" had changed to "the Sable City."

Not to be outdone, the funeral train that finally arrived at 1:21 p.m. was so lavishly draped in black crepe that only the windows were visible. Every bit of brightwork was covered. Over the boiler head rode an outsize portrait of the late president. It too was framed in black crepe.

The president's widow emerged supported by Secretary of State James G. Blaine and her oldest son, Harry. An honor guard of eight sergeants from the 2nd U.S. Artillery carried the silver-trimmed coffin to its hearse. The hearse was escorted by soldiers from the railroad station to Cleveland's Monumental Park, as Public Square was then called. This was a large, open quadrangle in the center of the city which when Garfield was a boy had been used by grazing cattle but which was now reserved for more solemn civic occasions. It was now dominated by a hastily-constructed pavilion, on the same site and of similar design to the one which, fifteen years earlier, had briefly sheltered the coffin of Abraham Lincoln on his last journey to Springfield, Illinois.

A dozen pallbearers, all of them Clevelanders, transferred the coffin from the hearse to this pavilion. Each of these men had been associated with Garfield in one phase or another of his remarkably varied career. James H. Rhodes had taught alongside Garfield at the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (now Hiram College); Charles Henry had been Garfield's

student, then a soldier in Garfield's Civil War regiment and, finally, his old colonel's lieutenant in the political wars of the nineteenth Ohio congressional district. Edwin Cowles had promoted Garfield's political career in the pages of his newspaper, *The Cleveland Leader*; Daniel P. Eels had contributed money to further that career; and former congressman Richard C. Parsons had almost destroyed that career by dragging Garfield into an unsavory paving-contract scandal. Others were old friends and members of the church in which Garfield not only prayed but preached: the Disciples of Christ.

Together, they carried their friend's remains into the pavilion and placed it upon a raised platform. This pavilion, or catafalque, measured forty-five feet on each side. Its shape was square, with a thirty foot high archway on each side to facilitate access. From each of the pillars which supported that arch was stretched a canopy which tapered to seventy-two feet above ground level. On top of that rested a globe (looking like a black maraschino cherry on a giant sundae) and on top of *that* brooded a twenty-four foot tall gilt angel whose wing tips hovered ninety-six feet above the ground.

Every inch of the catafalque was covered with some reminder of mortality. This was not an age which believed in stark simplicity. Flags, banners and shields were placed at strategic locations. The names of the states ran up the columns and cannon, their muzzles draped in black, crouched at every corner. Flowers were everywhere—an estimated \$3000 worth. Cleveland's supply was exhausted and had to be supplemented by two boxcars from Cincinnati. Tuberoses, begonias, ferns and immortelles were piled in profusion inside the pavilion and spilled over into the adjacent park. The floral tributes required two full newspaper columns to give what the author apologetically called a "meagre" description. They were arranged to form crosses, masonic symbols, messages ("Gone But Not Forgotten" in white immortelles) and altar pieces representing "The Last Sheaf," "Gates Ajar," "The Union Forever" and other such sentiments.

Amidst such lush surroundings, the coffin itself seemed almost indecently bare. It was graced only by a pair of palm branches arranged in a V (for victory) and by Queen Victoria's wreath. At the head of the casket someone had propped a placard bearing a motto of unknown origin:

"Life's race well run,
Life's work well done,
Life's crown well won;
Now comes rest."

A military honor guard stood at frozen attention around the coffin. With their high busbies, broad epaulettes and white belts crossed at the chest they looked for all the world like the tin soldiers from Babes in Toyland, adding a fantasy touch to the solemn scene.

On Sunday the catafalque was thrown open to the public. The line of viewers at times stretched across the Superior viaduct and up Pearl Street on the city's west side. While the Marine Corps band played mournful dirges, the proces-

sion filed through the pavilion six abreast at a brisk 140 persons a minute. They came all day, through the night and into the morning of September 26.

At dawn that morning the streets of Cleveland were already crowded. By 8:00 a.m. even foot traffic was paralyzed on Euclid Avenue. That street, which was to be the route of the afternoon's procession was decorated as much for a festival as for a funeral, presenting "a curious compound of Sabbath and popular holiday." Street vendors peddling souvenirs and refreshments lightened the tedium of waiting but added an incongruous note of commerce to the proceedings.

Precisely at 9:00 a.m. soldiers halted the procession of viewers, much to the indignation of those who had waited hours for an opportunity (now lost) to see the casket. The services began at ten. The mourners had already taken their seats around the catafalque. The dignitaries included eighteen United States senators, forty congressmen, former president Rutherford B. Hayes, future president Benjamin Harrison, and a contingent of governors, mayors, generals and admirals. The Garfield family came when all was ready. Most visibly affected was the late president's aged mother who threw herself, weeping and praying, upon the coffin.

The day was already hot and sultry. There was no shade nor ice water for the mourners. None was more visibly uncomfortable than General Winfield Scott Hancock, the man Garfield had defeated for the presidency almost exactly a year earlier. At the Battle of Gettysburg Hancock had displayed such cool nonchalance that he had won the nickname "The Superb," but now, his dress uniform soaked with perspiration, he loudly moaned that the heat was unbearable.

The services began with the Episcopal burial service read by Bishop G.T. Bedell. In life, Garfield had scorned Episcopalian formality for the simpler piety of the Disciple brotherhood but it was decided that he should be sent to his Maker in a more decorous fashion. After various prayers and hymns, the funeral oration was delivered by a Disciple minister, Isaac Errett. This was an appropriate choice. Errett and Garfield had been young preachers in the same church a quarter century earlier and even though Garfield had left the pulpit for a worldly career their friendship had remained undimmed.

Errett took as his text: "And the archers shot King Josiah, and the King said to his servants, have me away, for I am sore wounded." He expounded on this theme for over forty minutes in the steaming heat. Even the newspapers were compelled to admit that the services "were rather long and somewhat tedious." The vast crowd outside the park displayed surprising patience and good order even though they could see little and hear nothing. At his peroration Errett wept openly, as did many of the spectators, Hancock most conspicuously.

The eulogy was followed by a rendition of "Ho! Reapers of Life's Harvest," one of the many hymns claimed to have been the late president's favorite. After a benediction the coffin was carried by ten soldiers to a funeral car and the mourners

took their places in carriages for the procession to Lake View Cemetery, five miles to the east. The funeral car was a top-heavy conveyance, capped by a mock funerary urn perched twenty feet above street level. It was, of course, heavily draped with black broadcloth, showing no touch of color except for the white-tipped plumes bobbing from the twelve black horses who slowly pulled it up Euclid Avenue. They were led by six grooms, all Black.

Euclid Avenue was then primarily residential. The lower portion was lined with the posh homes of Cleveland millionaires whose constant boast was that their address was on what was commonly called "The Most Beautiful Street in the World." On this day its sidewalks were packed ten to twenty people deep. Every window was occupied, as were the doorsteps, porches and, despite the heat, even the rooftops. The solemnity of the past few days had spent itself and the crowd displayed a festive spirit. Their attention was absorbed by the many celebrities in the procession, whose names they excitedly called out as each passed. "There is evidently a greater desire to see the distinguished living than to pay homage to the illustrious dead," one cynic concluded. Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln, son of an earlier martyred president, was a particular object of curiosity.

The funeral procession was so long that its head reached the cemetery gates just as its tail was leaving Monumental Park. When it was halfway through its course a violent rain storm burst upon the city. The spectators quickly scattered and the now waterlogged cortege made its way to the cemetery in semi-privacy. The soggy draperies on the funeral car dragged in the mud and caught in its wheels.

The services at the cemetery were brief. An oration was delivered by J.H. Jones, chaplain of Garfield's Civil War regiment and the closing benediction was given by Burke A. Hinsdale, himself a one-time student of the late president's and a lifelong friend. The coffin was placed in a flower-laden vault guarded by soldiers in the presence of the small group of dedicated mourners who had braved the storm. After the multitudes of the past few days it seemed somehow strange that Garfield, as one orator elegantly put it, should take "his seat in the parliament of the skies" in silence, "darkness, gloom and desolation."

So came to an end what the *Boston Globe* hailed as "The Most Impressive Funeral Ever Witnessed in America." The cost of the extravaganza was estimated at \$247,650 but that figure was clearly a grossly inflated estimate; the verifiable expenses seem to have been less than one-sixth of that amount. Years earlier, when Garfield had been a young man, he had recorded his indignation at an ostentatious tomb: "I could not but feel...that it was an unnecessary expense which might have relieved the sufferings of hundreds." Fortunately for his peace of mind he was spared the necessity of witnessing his own magnificent and expensive funeral celebration.

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